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Against Germany

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The President is dead.

The news of the death of F. D. Roosevelt, President of the United States, arrived on a gray, wet April day at the concentration camp at Mauthausen.

The second world war was in its last dying convulsions. Europe's tortured, downtrodden people were beginning to raise their heads out of the mire to look hopefully toward a period of happiness and peace. To them, the United States and its president were among the principal champions and foundation-layers of that longed-for period.

This is an attempt to capture the reactions of the people at the concentration camp to the news of the president's death. It is done as a mark of respect to his memory.

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The dogged April drizzle seeped cheerlessly through the rents in the canvas.

Many of the people lay on their rotten straw mattresses with eyeballs upturned, awaiting the death that lurked close by. Others, gnawed by raging hunger, kept asking every minute in the whining tones of senility the same peevish question -- "What time will soup be issued? Will there be any today? And will there be carrots in it?"

A few, in whom the will to live and some inner strength had maintained, through every hardship, the spark of reason and human dignity, were gathered in groups, talking.

In the trenches between the tents, thousands of withered

corpses lay in heaps. The lightly sprinkling rain washed a stinking fluid from these disintegrating bodies, a smell which mingled with that of the latrines that completely encircled the tents. A cloudlike miasma lay over the camp.

Not even the severest beating could energize anyone enough, by this time, to dig. The distribution of carrot soup had become progressively rarer, and the occurrence of death more frequent.

But the Grand Order of Horrors was trembling; the end was near.

Yet the barbed wire was still intact, and machine guns still peered from the guards' turrets.

Heavy artillery roared at intervals at a distance, like an approaching storm.

"The Russians," whispered a man.

Or, with a deep drone that made the canvas walls shudder, machines burst from the thick clouds followed by earth-shaking explosions. From somewhere in the woods beyond the barbed wire, the cough of anti-aircraft was heard.

"The Liberators ^{THE} ~~are~~ American," another man murmured.

Hope dawned exhaustedly in some of the faces.

Then a hysterical shout, the thump of blows, the sound of wailing.

"The Germans."

Dark, twisted smiles appeared on the listeners' faces.

Then all was quiet for a little while.

A discussion was going on.

Was it a matter of days, or only of hours?

One or the other of the armies was sure to arrive soon.
Or would they all arrive at the same time?

An anxious question was asked: Would the Nazis liquidate the prisoners at the last minute, as they had in other places? Was escape from this man-made hell possible? It was surely unlikely that one could again be free, and a man.

And then? What would happen next? To us? To them?

What would the world's face be like when all this was over?
Could there be peace at long last on the tormented earth?

The anxious ones gestured resignedly. Ah, there would always be something. Once these ~~we~~^{were} gone, others would find something to fight about.

But some were more hopeful. What about the leaflets that English-American planes had dropped over the fields the winter before, during the building of the earth-works, leaflets quoting the promises of the Yalta and Teheran conferences? These hopeful ones drew for their despairing comrades the face of a new world in which there would be a place for every liberty-loving nation and peace-abiding man.

Those to whom things looked dark gradually quieted and fell under the spell of the expecters of miracles. Together, they awaited the great moment.

In the entrance to the tent, suddenly there appeared the figure of the Newsgiver. The insignia of the Spanish prisoners

was marked upon the sleeve of his black work-uniform. He had fallen into German hands in France and had spent four years here at Mauthausen. Luck had saved him, somehow, from the periodic liquidations. He had acquired a measure of freedom of action simply by having been there so long. Detailed to clean the offices, he was alert to whatever he could overhear there, and stole a glimpse of a newspaper whenever he could. Thus he provided the camp dwellers with the nourishment of news from the outside world.

Now he looked quickly around the tent to make sure that no German was present, then glanced behind him in case he was followed. The small knots of prisoners watched him tensely. They could tell he had news.

Good or bad? News of freedom, or of destruction?

Swiftly and silently, he moved closer. In broken German, he whispered into the faces before him, faces strained with suspense and anxiety:

"Roosevelt is dead."

The faces became like the wooden statues of Indians, which for centuries have borne the stamp of suffering.

The Spaniard thought he had not been understood. He bent toward them once more and whispered hoarsely:

"Roosevelt is dead." Garbed in black as if he himself were Death, he moved along between the rows of people.

This news, at this moment, had no immediate importance to these people; the end of the war was now a matter of days or hours; each individual's fate -- whether survival or death --

could not now be influenced by the passing of that soul thousands of miles away. Yet every prisoner, upon hearing, forgot his own situation. A heavy forboding settled upon the numbed spirits. A great misfortune had occurred; something had moved into the past, something that took away with it a little of their faith in the future. A part of that which had lent them hope and endurance throughout their sufferings had vanished -- a piece of that faint dawn that glimmered in the dim future. Their belief that, after the cataclysm, a world would arise in which it would be good to live -- words and plans, like departing dreams, were suddenly nothing. The president's statements had become world slogans -- "the four freedoms," "a life free from fear." In place of these an abyss opened up, full of terrifying, unanswered questions.

What would come now?

The post-war antagonisms of the wartime allies, the splitting into two of the earth, the ever-present fear of war, the whirling cloud of nuclear destruction hovering over the world -- all these may have come into existence if Roosevelt had lived, but perhaps not quite as they have.

But all this was not known then; there was only a faint, bewildering intuition; within the minds of these doomed prisoners, fear of the future loomed, and behind the fear the drum-beats of dimly sensed history.

At the beginning of the second world war, the United States became the mainstay of the European peoples who were struggling for independence. With its participation in the war and the victorious conclusion, the United States became the leader of the

whole Western world. The figure of its president, Roosevelt, became transformed into the personification of freedom.

Tyrants and murderers hated his name, but in the ears of the oppressed and suffering people, it meant liberation. His name was a banner, the flag of humanity and freedom, the hope of the future, and its promise.

A world in which the little man, "the man in the street," Roosevelt's man, could walk the earth free of dread, free of tormented dreams of a fearful future.

To be able to face the future with firm faith and a cheerful heart?

Now all this had shrunk to three words:

"Roosevelt is dead."

Complete silence had fallen within the tent. The hungry stopped asking for food, and the strong of heart stood with bowed heads as if they had not lived to see the end of the war after all.

A belted, booted figure appeared in the entrance. His grief-stricken glance swept over the crowd. The people scattered fearfully. But no, this time there was no cause to fear him; he looked good-natured and merciful for once.

Even this being, reduced now to an instrument of torture, sensed something out of the common. Even the coarse strings of his mental world had caught the note. His features, at other times distorted by self-induced hatred and fury, were now calm and pleasant, as he looked over the confused, frightened faces.

He tapped his boot with his cane, standing there like a

victorious general, as if he himself had won the war.

He did not hurt anyone; the great conqueror could afford to be magnanimous enough on this occasion not to break a few heads. He stood gazing for a time, then with a condescending smile turned on his heel and left the tent.

The people stood wordlessly.

Artillery fire, moving nearer, boomed sorrowfully among the hills; planes screeched above the trees; the drizzling rain started from the leaden sky and fell ceaselessly and hopelessly upon the wracked earth.

Borne on wires and cables as pain is by sick nerves, the news sped over the world:

The president ^{is} ~~was~~ dead.

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